

You Can't Always Get What You Want (Unless You Know These Rules)

Would you like Ridgewater College to be able to provide you with information like your student's academic progress or even tuition balance? If so, read on. You may be surprised to learn that, in most cases, Ridgewater College will need your student's written consent. WE hope that this document will help you understand Ridgewater College's duty to protect student privacy and encourage you to act now to ensure access to student information when you need it – or at least avoid the frustration of being caught unaware of the rules.

Why do colleges and universities say they need to protect the privacy of student records? It's not just a school policy, but it's the law. Minnesota state Colleges and Universities are subject to federal law, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and state law, the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act (MGDPA), which contain detailed rules about student record privacy. One key provision of those laws is that college and university *students* have the right to control disclosure of private education records about themselves to third parties – including parents, spouses or other family members. These rights apply to all college or university students – even if they are minors.¹

What is an “education record”? “Education records” that are subject to these privacy laws encompass a wide scope of information. Examples of education records include: grades, housing information, class enrollment, attendance information, counseling or medical records from campus health centers, disciplinary records, tuition balance information – and much more. Most education records are classified as “private.” Schools may release private education records to third parties – including family members – only if the law permits or if the student has a signed valid authorization.

Of course, students themselves may release their own information as they wish.

When may school officials release private education records to family members? It depends on a number of factors; some situations do not require the student's consent. For example, where the health or safety of the students or others is in danger, school officials may release information in order to deal with that emergency. Those are rare situations.

In most circumstances, family members will need to show a signed, dated authorization for release of information. A form that has been developed for this use is located in the Ridgewater College Student Service office or it can be found on our website under student forms. However, any document that included the following would be valid: who is authorized to release the information; to whom the information may be released; what information may be released; the purpose for which the information may be used; the student's signature; and a date. A simple e-mail from the student is not a sufficient authorization.

¹ Records of a PSEO student are routinely shared with the high school where the student is also in attendance. Parents are presumed to have access to a student's records at the high school unless the student is age 18 or older.

Send the completed form to:

Ridgewater College
Student Service Office
2101 15th Avenue Northwest
Willmar, MN 56201

or

Ridgewater College
Student Service Office
2 Century Avenue Southeast
Hutchinson, MN 55350

An original release form is not required. School officials may honor a copy of a valid release, including a fax. An authorization could permit disclosure of information by phone or e-mail so long as an otherwise valid release is on file. A form could also authorize on-going disclosures, such as grades, each semester.

We encourage you to discuss with your student signing a release before issues of access arise. Releases may be as broad or as limited as desired. You may want to remind your student of the potential negative consequences of not permitting you to have access to information like tuition balance! It is also important to note that releases are typically valid for one year and need to be renewed each year.

Doesn't the fact that I pay my child's tuition give me automatic access to information? No. Schools are permitted to have a policy whereby the parents of a financially dependent child may have access to private education records without the child's consent.

Ridgewater College does not have such a policy, and so you will generally need the student's written consent for private information, even if you financially support the student in whole or in part.

Can't a college or university require students to sign a release to parents? No. Any release of privacy rights requested by the school must be voluntary.

Is there any information that is public about students at a college or university?

Each college or university defines certain information about its students as "directory." This information was selected because Ridgewater College officials determined that disclosing this information would not generally be considered to be an invasion of privacy.

Ridgewater College's definition of "directory" information can be found on our webpage. It is subject to change. Directory information is available to anyone and no student consent is required to release it. However, students have the right to suppress their directory data so that it is treated as "private." For those students, school officials may not release their directory information without written consent or other legal authority.

Where can I go for further information on the privacy of student records?

Contact the Ridgewater College Data Practices Compliance Official: Heidi Olson, Dean of Student Services, for information about records policies.